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ABSTRACT

Practicing counselors are often working in settings that do not include regularly-assigned supervisors. In the absence of regular supervision, today's counselors must meet mounting demands for accountability by demonstrating competence and expressing professional autonomy. When a difficult situation arises with a given client, what can and should the counselor do? In a supervised situation, the supervisor actively supports the assessment-action-evaluation process. In a self-supervised situation the assessment, action, and evaluation processes are self-initiated and self-maintained. A self-supervision model represents these processes in a continuous loop. The assessment process determines the direction of needed change; the self-action part involves attempts at direct change, including changing the environment and the consequences of certain behaviors; and the evaluation of the action step provides feedback to subsequent self-assessment thereby modeling an on-going process without a beginning or end. This self-supervision process combining self-awareness, self-action, and self-evaluation helps a counselor to avoid the professional pitfall of burnout. (Author/ABL)

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Self-Supervision: What to do When You're Stuck Without an Assigned Supervisor

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Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
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Abstract

Practicing counselors are often working in settings that do not include regularly-assigned supervisors. In the absence of regular supervision, today's counselors must meet mounting demands for accountability by demonstrating competence and expressing professional autonomy. When a difficult situation arises with a given client, what can and should the counselor do? Initially, a model relating self-awareness to skill development is presented. Following discussion of the importance of continued skill development in preventing possible counselor burn-out, a conceptualization of self-supervision is presented which combines self-awareness, self-action and self-evaluation in a continuous feedback loop.

Self-Supervision: What to do when You're Stuck Without and Assigned Supervisor

All three of the cases cited above present situations that require counselor supervision. Yet, in each case, the individual involved does not have an assigned counselor supervisor. It is in just such situations that self-supervision becomes essential.

Although Yager and Littrell (1978) have defined counseling supervision as "the process by which counselor trainees or practicing counselors receive information, feedback, and support relative to maximizing their effectiveness with clients" (p. 1), there is little evidence in the counseling literature that counselors in the field actually receive services. Despite the need for continued professional updating, typical counselor "supervision" (beyond that received as part a graduate training program) might often be more accurately labeled "administration." In many cases, the counselor is expected to report periodically to the "supervisor" to discuss the particulars of the job but not to discuss specific difficulties encountered in dealing with clients.

While most counselors may "be on their own" in arranging methods to insure their own personal and professional growth, this does not mean that they need go without supervision. If counseling supervisors are not available, counselors need to develop their own methods of self-supervision! Meyer (1978),

Bernstein and Lecomte (1979), and Bernstein, Hofmann, and Wade (1986) have addressed the concept of self-supervision and have offered possible methods to approach this task, particularly during the process of counselor training. These contributions to the field have clarified the importance of learning a self-supervisory model to the overall development of a counselor who can maintain competence and professional autonomy within post-training settings. The model presented in Bernstein, Hofmann, and Wade (1986) can easily be generalized to applications in the type of situation described at the start of this paper. Therefore, it is the purpose of this article to expand on the skill of self-supervision to aide the counselor staying current with the field. [Much of the remainder of the present paper has been adapted from a longer article on the same topic. Those interested in the more complete treatment of this subject are referred to Yager and Park (1986).]

A Model of Counselor Skill Development

A major key to personal change is awareness. A counselor's self-awareness and continued skill development tie directly to one another. Figure 1 illustrates the manner in which these two concepts are related. In discussing this relationship, several hypothetical individuals will be described at various points in the "cycle of development."

Insert Figure 1 about here

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1. Nancy Naive ("N" in Figure 1) is a first-year teacher. She does not know the counselor in her school. If asked, Nancy might describe a "school counselor" as the person who advises juniors and seniors in college selection. Since Nancy's knowledge of the counselor's role is limited to her own exposure to a counselor in high school, she certainly has no personal skills in the areas of counseling, consulting or coordination.

2. Alan Aware ("A" in Figure 1) is more aware of the definition of a counselor than was Nancy. Several years ago, Alan had experienced concerns that led him to seek personal counseling at a mental health agency. Also, somewhat later, Alan had observed a rehabilitation counselor at the hospital working with his dad following a spinal cord injury. Unlike Nancy, Alan had the opportunity to observe first hand that counseling, in a variety of settings, can provide help with varying client concerns. Alan had become aware of the counselor's role, and he had observed counselors performing some the activities that define this

role. Although Alan is knowledgeable of the skills on an awareness level, he is unable to demonstrate these skills himself.

3. Charlie Competent ("C" in Figure 1) was so impressed with the potential benefits of helping others through counseling that he obtained a masters degree in this field. As he proceeded through his graduate program in college personnel counseling, he was made aware of the skills he needed to develop. He began to tie his conceptual awareness to actual skill demonstration. Interestingly, however, Charlie found, during his counseling internships in various student development settings on campus, that he was becoming so well practiced in counseling techniques that he no longer needed to "think" quite so much while demonstrating effective skills. For example, Charlie no longer needed to remind himself that active listening was a skill he "should" use when his college student clients were emotionally upset: he had begun to react naturally with empathy. The empathic response had become part of Charlie's own style. He had come a long way from his first practice when he had to focus carefully (with maximal awareness of skills) on each and every response to maximize his empathy.

4. Beverly Burnout ("B" in Figure 1) has moved too far in the cycle of skill development. After four years as a substance abuse counselor, Bev feels tired and helpless. She no longer thinks about of the counselor skills demanded by the job. In essence, Beverly has lost her awareness of the skills entirely. For a time, Bev had conducted her individual and group counseling sessions "at full steam" by using all of her counseling skills without a need for focused self-awareness to cue each of her actions. Somewhere in the process of all the demands on her time, however, Beverly stopped learning! By only reacting to the daily crises in the treatment program, Bev had ended her continued awareness of new ideas. Through a lack of stimulation, her skills deteriorated. Beverly was so busy, however, she did not realize that she was no longer operating as effectively as she had when she was new to the field. Her deterioration was directly linked to her lack of awareness! Bev was burned out as a counselor. She vitally needed the supervision and collegiality she had been lacking in recent months.

5. Sally Selfsupervisor ("S" in Figure 1), a college counselor, has taken it upon herself to combat directly the potential threats to burn-out. She knows that the area of most effective counseling behavior is along the highest

levels of the skills axis in the Figure 1 Model. Sally does not really care if she is performing her skills with awareness or without awareness as long as she continues to perform effectively with her clients in the college counseling center. Unlike Beverly who continued to add activities to her schedule until she had reached saturation, Sally had forced herself to employ self-awareness in evaluating her job and in limiting her attempted impact. Oftentimes, Sally had been able to say "No" when asked to perform a task not directly related to the mission of the College Counseling Center. Sally had, in essence, created time for herself to learn what is new in the field. Her "forced awareness" had pushed her back up the awareness axis in the Figure 1 Model! Although Sally may be no less busy than Bev in her job, she was more excited about her work and more challenged because she was always trying out new ideas and new skills.

In the above examples, the major pitfall to continued counselor growth becomes evident. Beverly, through the very growth that made her an effective counselor, became less aware of her actions and of her impact. By her own high motivation to be as helpful as possible, she created her own debilitating overload of activity.

What actually distinguishes Beverly from Sally? Why does one person engage in self-supervision and overcome the professional pitfall of burn-out while the other cannot? A look at the supervision process may provide an answer.

Elements of Self-Supervision

Typically, supervision is an interpersonal process. An external agent, the supervisor, takes on some degree of responsibility for helping the supervisees to expand their effectiveness as counselors. There are at least three processes that facilitate this growth in supervisee effectiveness.

1. The supervisor facilitates self-awareness on the part of the supervisee.

2. In some way, either as a consequence of having stimulated self-awareness or through direct transferring of skills, the supervisor encourages positive action on the part of the supervisee.

3. The supervisor stimulates periodic re-evaluation of the supervisee's practices. As an on-going process, information gained by this periodic evaluation continually feeds back into the self-assessment.

In summary, the supervisor actively supports the assessment-action-evaluation process. The self-supervisory process is one in which each of these functions is maintained in a self-initiated and self-maintained fashion. Figure 2 is a picture of the self-supervision model. Initially, the model requires self-assessment. Once this assessment process has determined the direction of needed change, the self-action part of the model involves attempts at direct change. These action steps include a combination of changing the environment and changing the consequences of certain behaviors. The evaluation of the action steps provides feedback to subsequent self-assessment. Thus, the self-supervision process is on-going without either a clear beginning or an end. The remainder of the paper will expand briefly on each of the three components of the self-supervision model.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Self-Assessment

Perhaps the most crucial element in self-change is the initial step: self-awareness (Mahoney & Thoresen, 1972).

Applied to self-supervision, the application of the skill of self-assessment may take the form of the following question: "What am I doing poorly, doing well, or doing not at all in my counseling responsibilities?" An assessment difficulty for many counselors is that their role can viewed as encompassing many diverse activities, not all of which involve counseling skills per se. Given the variety of counseling role expectations, it may be difficult for counselors to describe their roles within an organized, systematic framework. Taking the perspective of the counselor as functioning within a social system may be helpful in breaking out of traditional understandings and facilitating a fresh awareness of the job of the counselor. The new awareness resulting from such an attempt is essential for the most effective self-supervision.

Although an outside supervisor may not be present, the usual supervisory function of stimulating new thinking and developing different points of view can be achieved by self-application of the assessment model. The specific ideas outlined as suggestions for self-observation and self-assessment in Bernstein et al. (1986) provide excellent starting points for implementation of an assessment. The three counselors cited as examples in the beginning of this paper had already (although perhaps not on a systematic basis) completed a self-assessment leading to an identification of an area that they each felt needed further attention and learning.

Self-Action

It is possible to become aware of current functioning without ever taking action to change. Although self-awareness is probably the major obstacle to effective self-supervision, the process is woefully incomplete without direct self-action steps to do something about that awareness! Interestingly, the completion of a self-assessment, such as those in the examples given earlier, is one active step (in-and-of itself) toward self-supervision!

The self-assessment provides a guide to aid in generating the action steps needed during self-supervision. Below are several questions designed to pinpoint the aspects of the self-awareness exercise that may become directions for action and change. Although any counselor's questions would be individualized, the following list might be used as starter questions, each includes a brief indication of possible action steps following from the question.

1. What is the focus of my functioning as a counselor? Am I overloading myself with too many demands and expectations in my work? Is there any important parts of my work that I am neglecting? -- Of course, attempting to incorporate too many

activities would only further contribute to the "counselor role overload" experienced by Beverly Burnout! A more effective goal would be to identify imbalances between my counselor role and the expectations of the counseling agency. By identifying imbalances, many tired, overused approaches might be replaced by fresher, more innovative, and stimulating practices. For example, a college counselor whose self-assessment reveals five individual sessions each week with substance abusing clients might decide to meet once weekly with all five clients in a substance abuse group.

2. Are there ways I can achieve the goals of my work by putting more time into prevention and developmental activities? -- For example, if I am involved in a large amount of remedial one-to-one work with substance abusers in a hospital setting, is there any way I might be able to provide some of my time to give developmental/preventative education to groups such as high school students? Would such activity dramatically change my work? Probably not, but it might have an impact on me (e.g., rejuvenation through the change of pace) and upon some of those in the high school group.

3. How self-reinforcing are the strategies I have been applying? -- Perhaps one of the problems has been that I have not really been enjoying my work. In planning action, it is

necessary to keep in mind not only one's functioning within the system but also one's personal needs as well. In a sense, the two needs are inseparable. One cannot prevent burn-out without paying attention to the need for self-reinforcement and self-encouragement. As a step toward renewal, can I achieve the same goals for the agency in some way that would be more personally satisfying? For example, if the counselor enjoys photography, there may be a need for a slide presentation describing the community of the services available at the agency which would provide useful to both the counselor and the agency.

4. Given the "desired activities" identified, do I possess the skills necessary to implement them? -- Too often counselors, in an attempt to "remain current," gain new professional information and skills in a haphazard, indiscriminate fashion. As a result, they invest their energy in acquiring skills only remotely related to the skills necessary for current professional needs. When discrepancies between current and desired skill levels are identified, the counselor can be more focused in a continuing education effort, seeking out only those experiences most contributory to professional growth.

5. Is my plan realistic? -- The renewed energy stimulated by the assessment and planning process is simultaneously an advantage and a threat to self-supervision. While providing a

stimulus for professional growth, renewed energy may lead to an overestimation of possible limits. A careful time analysis of proposed activities is in order, with due consideration to fact that everything takes longer than you think.

Suggestions for implementing self-supervision. Although there are unlimited ways to implement action in an effort toward self-improvement and self-supervision, a review of a few specific ideas might help start the "creative juices" in the new self-supervisor. Therefore, please consider the following ten suggestions as merely a beginning point.

1. Become a member of one or more professional groups. Of particular relevance to counselors are the American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD) and any of the AACD's 13 divisions that are specifically related to your work (e.g., The American Mental Health Counselors Association for those in mental health agencies; the American Rehabilitation Counseling Association for those working in rehabilitation). Belonging to a professional association does not guarantee that you can keep up with changes in the counseling field, but the exposure you receive to such publications as the Guidepost and the Journal of Counseling and Development will ensure that you will be more informed than you would be otherwise!

2. Regularly attend local, state and/or national conventions of the professional associations. After you get home from a meeting, try out some of the many ideas that you have picked up as a result of both formal and informal conference contacts.

3. Write down realistic goals for your counseling and make sure that each week you have moved yourself in the direction of your goals. The self-management/self-change ideas described in Hector, Elson, and Yager's (1977) article may give you some specific ideas about how to begin your small steps toward change. Whenever you deal with goals, however, keep in mind there are inevitably more possible aspects of a counseling job than any human could achieve. Don't expect to accomplish every relevant activity, and don't expect perfection in those you do choose to address!

4. Among your goals for your counseling job, include the need to develop new ideas and approaches to your work. You are <u>not</u> being selfish when you spend time on self-development: although your "professional development" time may not "look like" hard work, it will help you be more productive in your job over the long haul.

5. Don't miss an opportunity to meet with other counselors who are working in similar jobs to your own. For example, many career development counselors are the only counselors for an entire business location. These individuals can create reasons to interact with other career specialists in nearby industries or in other types of settings. Sharing of difficulties can often lead to a reformulation of a problem that you would not have been likely to have discovered on your own. If you are a supervisor and need supervision, don't overlook your supervisees as excellent sources of potential consultation, support and learning.

6. Occasionally you may find that you can help your self-supervision by increasing your exercise. Engaging in any activity that will make you physically tired can help you sort out the critical elements of a tough job situation. Physical exercise gives your mind a rest and, somehow, seems to allow formulation of new perspectives on issues.

7. Make audio and/or videorecordings of your counseling and consulting. Review these tapes very carefully (e.g., see Loughary, Stripling, & Fitzgerald, 1965). Compare your performance from one time period to another. Ask yourself such questions as: "Am I doing pretty much the same kinds of things I was doing in the tape that I made at the very beginning of the

year?" "What was I thinking as the client made that statement?" "How was the client feeling during this part of the tape?" Certainly, you could play these same tapes for others in your agency in either formal or informal consultation sessions. (In this regard, do not discount the potential helpful source of feedback represented by your clients themselves.)

8. Develop new skills in areas where you may not have received training previously. New learning, of course, can occur through formal classes at the local university, through readings in books obtained from the library, or through attendance at one of the many professional workshops regularly offered in a variety of locations throughout the country.

9. Arrange your vacation times in advance and <u>be sure you take them</u>! Plan a weekend from time to time to spend merely relaxing -- perhaps at a nearby hotel.

10. Try yourself out in a new setting. Spend some time doing work entirely unrelated to your job. Develop hobbies that allow you to get away from the job both physically and emotionally during your time off.

As one final and overriding suggestion, monitor yourself closely (again, the self-assessment part of the Figure 2 model is

an action step in its own right). Are you tired? Hopeless? Washed out? If so, do something to change the situation! Use one of the earlier suggestions or one of your own ideas, but do take action!

Evaluation of Action Attempts

The final step in the model of self-supervision presented in Figure 2 is the evaluation of the attempts at action for self-improvement and self-growth. Whatever small action steps you attempt, success is more likely if the outcome is directly evaluated as successful or unsuccessful. The evaluation step provides more assessment information for the self-assessment part of the model, and the cycle of Figure 2 simply begins again! Each time through the cycle moves the counselor to greater learning and improving skills. Perhaps of more importance, however, each cycle takes the counselor one step further away from the potential of burn-out!

Summary

Finally, for our three example counselors who served as the initial stimulus for this paper, what is suggested for self-supervision? With Sarah, who is beginning her work as a private practitioner, the recommendation is that self-supervision might

lead her to a more active involvement in a local counselor's association. There, she may meet some colleagues in situations very similar to her own. Some of these new professional colleagues certainly would have dealt with the type of difficulties presented by Sarah's present client. Additionally, they may have recommendations for Sarah regarding appropriate readings or other sources of information.

For John, he might seek the consultation of counselors outside the school setting. Although his town may not be sufficiently large to have an active counseling organization, he might be able to organize his own support system by introducing himself to counselors in the local mental health center. If John was an active member of a national professional association, he could also review his recent journals to find articles written directly on the subject of bulimia and its treatment.

For Barbara, the most immediate self-supervisory recommendation would be to seek support and consultation about her client from her supervisees. In an on-going professional relationship, it is perfectly appropriate for a sharing of consultation to occur <u>even if</u> the professionals' levels of experience may differ.

Thus, although each situation presents a slightly different issue of concern, the solution may be the same for all: Self-supervision!

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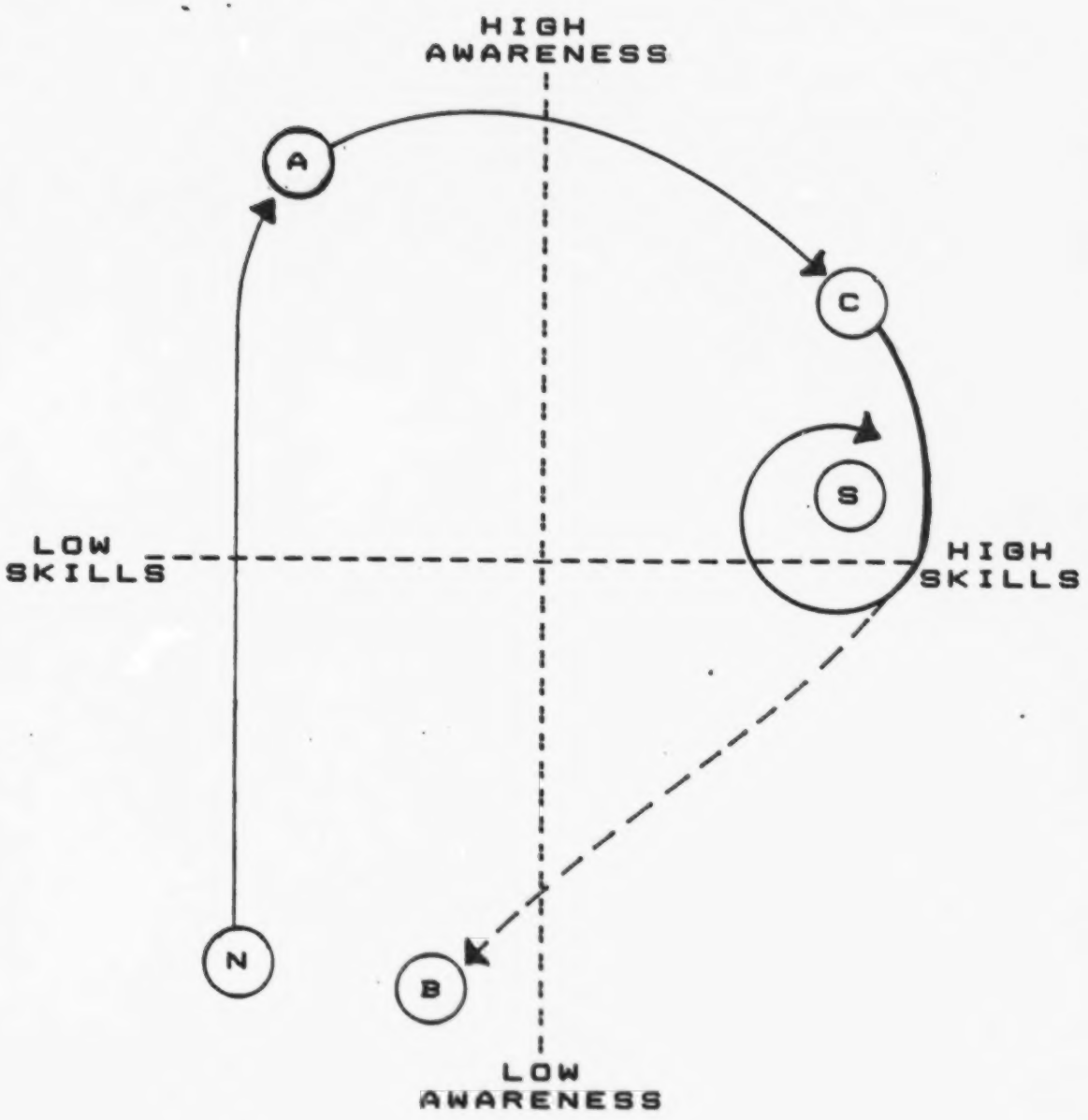
Figure Captions

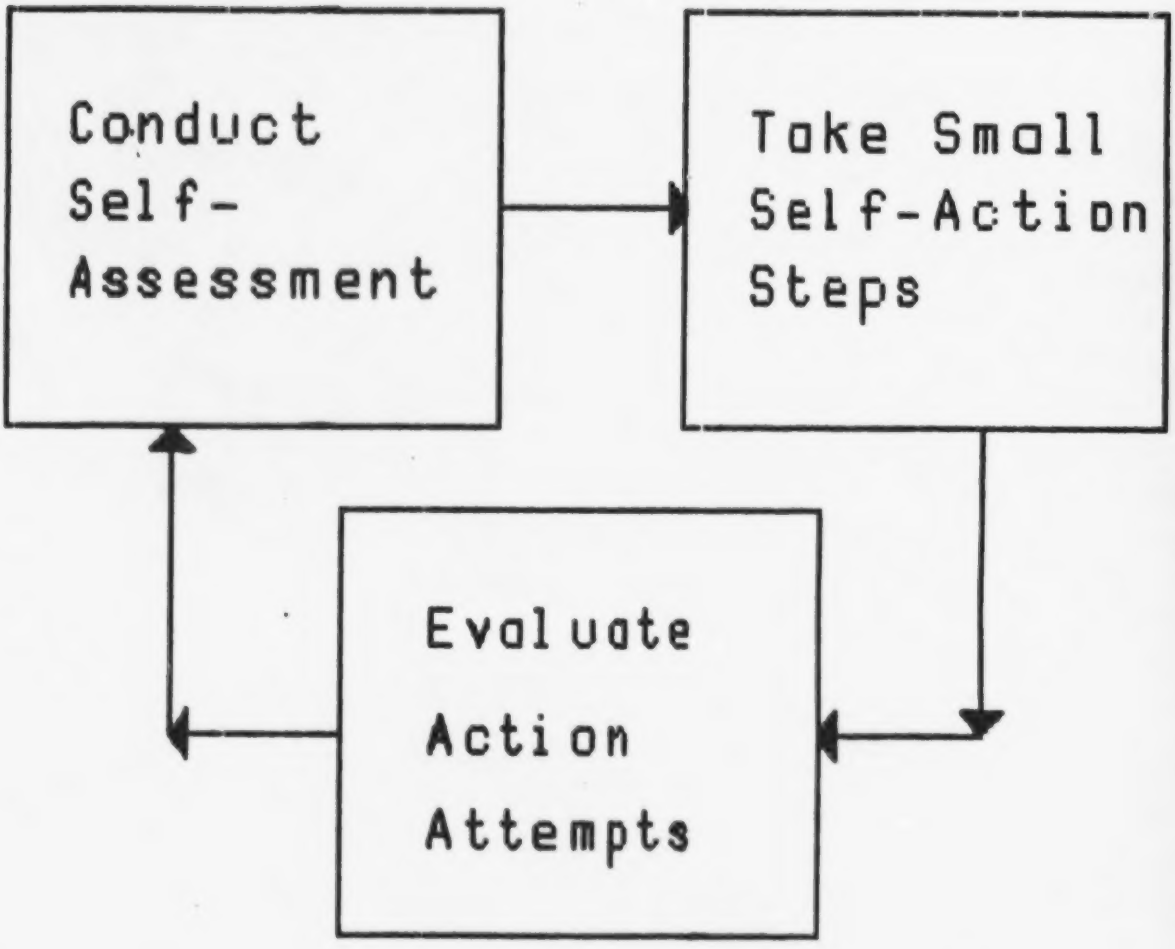
Figure 1. The cycle of skill development and awareness.

Figure 2. A model for self-supervision.



KEY

N = "Nancy Naive"
A = "Alan Aware"
C = "Charlie Competent"
B = "Beverly Burnout"
S = "Sally Selfsupervisor"


Conduct Self-Assessment
Take Small Self-Action Steps
Evaluate Action Attempts